

VA Office of Inspector General

OFFICE OF AUDITS & EVALUATIONS



Inspection of the VA Regional Office Jackson, MS

September 3, 2010
10-02460-240

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

NOD	Notice of Disagreement
OIG	Office of Inspector General
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RVSR	Rating Veterans Service Representative
SAO	Systematic Analysis of Operations
SSD	Support Services Division
STAR	Systematic Technical Accuracy Review
TBI	Traumatic Brain Injury
VACOLS	Veterans Appeals Control and Locator System
VARO	VA Regional Office
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VSC	Veterans Service Center
VSCM	Veterans Service Center Manager

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Report Highlights: Inspection of the VA Regional Office, Jackson, MS

Why We Did This Review

The Benefits Inspection Division conducts onsite inspections at VA Regional Offices (VAROs) to review disability compensation claims processing and Veterans Service Center (VSC) operations.

What We Found

The Jackson VSC management took proactive measures to implement or improve controls over the areas inspected. Management analyzed all previously issued VAOIG Benefits Inspection reports and applied the results to amend local policies and procedures and improve the VSC training program.

VARO staff correctly processed traumatic brain injury (TBI) and herbicide exposure disability claims. Staff generally followed the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) policy for processing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) claims.

Management ensured staff followed VBA policies by establishing the correct dates of claims in the electronic record and recording Notices of Disagreement (NODs) for appealed claims in the Veterans Appeals Control and Locator System (VACOLS). In addition, staff accurately completed all Systematic Analysis of Operations (SAOs) and corrected errors identified by VBA's Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR) program as required.

VARO management needs to improve the control and accuracy of claims processing for temporary 100 percent disability

evaluations. Overall, VARO staff did not accurately process disability claims for 26 (24 percent) of 107 claims reviewed. Management also needs to strengthen controls over date stamping incoming mail and processing competency determinations.

What We Recommended

We recommended the Jackson VARO management review all temporary 100 percent evaluations to determine if reevaluations are required and take appropriate action. We recommended VARO management develop and implement controls to ensure staff follow the workload management plan and properly request future examinations for temporary 100 percent disability evaluations.

We also recommended the VARO should develop and implement objective measures to ensure oversight of mailroom operations and establish a written policy outlining processes to ensure the timely completion of final incompetency determinations.

Agency Comments

The Director of the Jackson VARO concurred with all recommendations. Management's planned actions are responsive and we will follow-up as required on all actions.

(original signed by:)

BELINDA J. FINN

Assistant Inspector General
for Audits and Evaluations

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INTRODUCTION

Objective

The Benefits Inspection Program is part of the OIG's efforts to ensure our Nation's veterans receive timely and accurate benefits and services. The Benefits Inspection Division contributes to the improved management of benefits processing activities and veterans' services by conducting onsite inspections at VAROs. These independent inspections provide recurring oversight focused on disability compensation claims processing and performance of VSC operations. The objectives of the inspections are to accomplish the following:

- Evaluate how well VAROs are accomplishing their mission of providing veterans with convenient access to high quality benefits and services.
- Determine if management controls ensure compliance with VA regulations and policies, assist management in achieving program goals, and minimize the risk of fraud, waste, and other abuses.
- Identify and report systemic trends in VARO operations.

In addition to this standard coverage, inspections may examine issues or allegations referred by VA employees, members of Congress, or other stakeholders.

Scope of Inspection

During June 2010, the OIG conducted an inspection of the Jackson VARO. The inspection focused on 5 protocol areas examining 10 operational activities. The five protocol areas were disability claims processing, data integrity, management controls, workload management, and eligibility determinations.

We reviewed 77 (27 percent) of 289 disability claims related to PTSD, TBI, and herbicide exposure the VARO completed during January–March 2010. In addition, we reviewed 30 (15 percent) of 197 rating decisions where VARO staff granted temporary 100 percent evaluations for at least 18 months, generally the longest period under VA policy a temporary 100 percent evaluation may be assigned without review.

Appendix A provides details on the VARO and the scope of the inspection. Appendix B provides the Jackson VARO Director's comments on a draft of this report. Appendix C provides the criteria we used to evaluate each operational activity and a summary of our inspection results.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Disability Claims Processing

The OIG inspection team focused on disability claims processing related to temporary 100 percent evaluations, PTSD, TBI, and herbicide exposure. We considered claims processing accuracy and its impact upon veterans' benefits.

Finding

VARO Staff Need to Improve Disability Claims Processing Accuracy

The Jackson VARO needs to improve the accuracy of disability claims processing. VARO staff incorrectly processed disability claims for 26 (24 percent) of 107 claims reviewed. VARO management concurred and initiated action to correct the inaccuracies identified.

Table 1 compares claims processing accuracy of the Jackson VARO with three VAROs previously inspected. We found the Jackson VARO to be comparable with those offices.

Table 1. VARO Claims Processing Accuracy Comparison

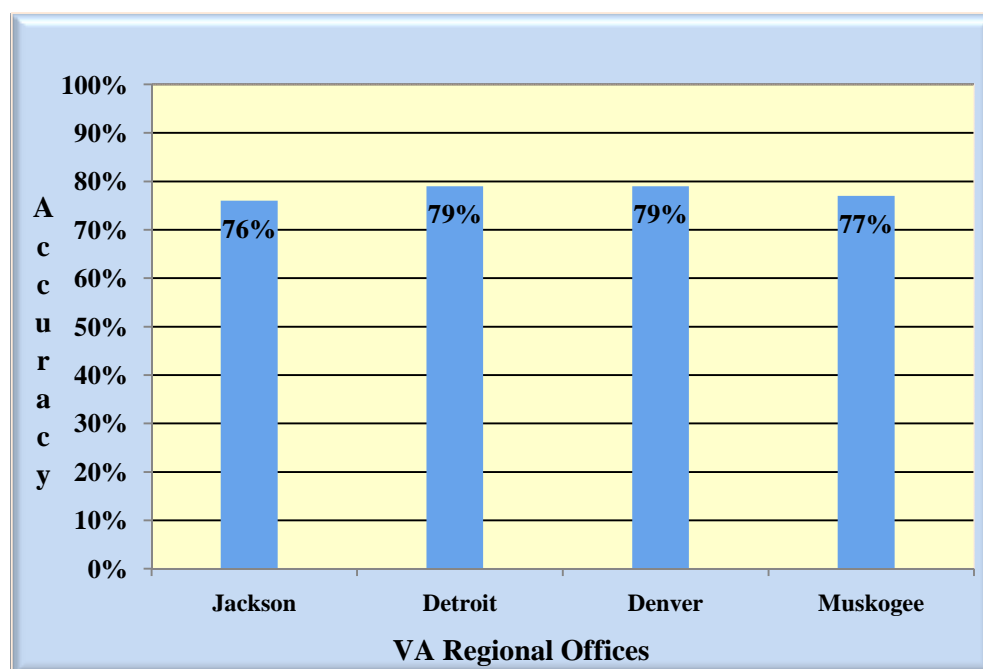


Table 2 reflects the errors affecting, and those with the potential to affect, veterans' benefits processed at the Jackson VARO:

Table 2. Disability Claims Processing Results

Type	Reviewed	Claims Incorrectly Processed		
		Total	Affecting Veterans' Benefits	Potential To Affect Veterans' Benefits
Temporary 100 Percent Evaluations	30	24	6	18
PTSD	30	2	1	1
TBI	17	0	0	0
Disabilities Related to Herbicide Exposure	30	0	0	0
Total	107	26	7	19

**Temporary
100 Percent
Evaluations**

VARO staff incorrectly processed 24 (80 percent) of the 30 temporary 100 percent disability evaluations reviewed. VBA policies provide a temporary 100 percent evaluation for service-connected disabilities requiring surgery or specific treatment. At the end of a mandated period of convalescence or cessation of treatment, VARO staff must request a future medical examination to help determine whether to continue the veteran's 100 percent disability benefits.

Based on analysis of available medical evidence, 6 of the processing inaccuracies affected veterans' benefits, resulting in overpayments totaling \$123,338. The most significant overpayment occurred when VARO staff did not request a future medical examination to evaluate a veteran's prostate cancer. This occurred despite staff properly recording the medical examination suspense date in the electronic record. Medical evidence in the claims folder revealed the veteran no longer had prostate cancer as of March 2007. As a result, VA overpaid the veteran a total of \$70,830 over a period of 2 years and 4 months.

The remaining 18 inaccuracies had the potential to affect veterans' benefits. Following are examples of these inaccuracies:

- For 15 cases, staff did not request mandatory medical examinations to determine whether the temporary 100 percent disability determination should continue.
- For one case, staff established a routine future examination 1 year and 4 months after its mandatory due date.

- For one case, the rating decision established the need for a routine future examination in October 2010; however, staff did not record the future date in the electronic record.
- For one case, staff proposed reducing the evaluation of the veteran's condition; however, the veteran requested a hearing to present new evidence. VARO staff did not schedule the hearing for approximately 9 years. During that time, the veteran continued to receive temporary 100 percent disability benefits.

We could not determine if these 18 temporary 100 percent disability determinations would have continued because the veterans' claims folders did not contain evidence of the medical examinations needed to evaluate each case. An average of 1 year and 5 months elapsed from the time staff should have scheduled these medical examinations until the date of our inspection. The elapsed time ranged from 3 months to 3 years and 3 months. VARO staff initiated action during our inspection to obtain the necessary medical evidence to reevaluate the cases.

VARO management informed us, and we confirmed staff did not follow the VSC workload management plan regarding processes for requesting medical examinations for temporary 100 percent disability claims. The workload management plan requires staff assigned to the Pre-Determination Team to process work items related to requesting the medical examinations. However, we found that staff assigned to the Post-Determination Team incorrectly cancelled these work items in the electronic records. A work item is an electronically generated notification that requires follow-up VSC action.

VSC staff did not follow the workload management plan because management did not provide adequate oversight of their processes and therefore was unaware that staff prematurely cancelled work items until our inspection. As a result, veterans' provided temporary 100 percent disability determinations did not always receive accurate benefits.

PTSD Claims

VARO staff incorrectly processed 2 (7 percent) of 30 PTSD claims reviewed. Although we did not consider this error rate significant, one of the errors affected veterans' benefits. A Rating Veterans Service Representative (RVSR) incorrectly evaluated a veteran's PTSD as 100 percent disabling. However, medical evidence, including a VA medical examination, did not show the PTSD symptoms warranted a 100 percent disability determination. As a result, VA overpaid the veteran a total of \$29,638 over a period of 1 year and 8 months.

Because we did not consider the frequency of errors significant, we determined the VARO generally followed VBA policy as it related to PTSD claims. We made no recommendations for improvement in this area.

TBI Claims

The Department of Defense and VBA commonly define a TBI as traumatically induced structural injury or physiological disruption of brain function caused by an external force. The major residual disabilities of TBI fall into three main categories: (1) physical, (2) cognitive, and (3) behavioral. VBA policies require staff to evaluate these residual disabilities.

VARO staff correctly processed all 17 TBI claims reviewed. As a result, we determined the VARO is following VBA policy regarding TBI claims and we made no recommendations for improvement in this area.

**Disabilities
Related to
Herbicide
Exposure
Claims**

VARO staff correctly processed all 30 herbicide exposure-related claims reviewed. As a result, we determined the VARO is following VBA policy regarding herbicide exposure-related claims and we made no recommendations for improvement in this area.

Recommendations

- 1. We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director conduct a review of all temporary 100 percent determinations under the regional office's jurisdiction to determine if reevaluations are required and take appropriate action.*
- 2. We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director develop and implement controls to ensure staff follow the workload management plan and properly request future examinations for temporary 100 percent disability evaluations.*

**Management
Comments**

The VARO Director concurred with our recommendations for improving the processing of temporary 100 percent disability determinations. The Director informed us VARO staff requested VA medical examinations and will complete rating decisions on 126 additional cases we provided for their review.

The Director stated the Regional Office amended the VSC workload management plan in June 2010, to ensure oversight of work items related to processing and controlling temporary 100 percent disability evaluations. In addition, Veterans Service Representatives received refresher training to ensure proper processing of work items and future exam diaries in accordance with all applicable VA regulations.

OIG Response

Management's comments and actions are responsive to the recommendations.

2. Data Integrity

In addition to specific inaccuracies in PTSD and temporary 100 percent disability claims processing, we identified errors regarding effective dates. Generally, the effective date is the date that entitlement to a specific benefit arose.

Further, we reviewed claims folders to determine if the VARO is following VBA policy regarding correctly establishing dates of claim in electronic records. VBA generally uses a date of claim to indicate when a document arrives at a specific VA facility. VBA relies on an accurate date of claim to establish and track a key performance measure of the average days to complete a claim.

Typically, the effective date and the date of claim may be the same date. However, in some instances a veteran submits a claim on one date, may be entitled to an earlier effective date based on earlier medical treatment. As a hypothetical example, a veteran already service-connected for a heart condition, files a claim for an increased evaluation of that condition on January 1, 2010. Earlier medical treatment records factually show the heart condition worsened prior to the January 1, 2010 claim. In this instance, VA is required to establish an earlier effective date for payment based on the evidence found in the medical records versus the date the claim arrived at the VARO.

Effective Dates

VARO staff incorrectly processed effective dates for 2 (2 percent) of 107 disability claims we reviewed. As discussed below, both of these errors affected veterans' benefits:

- An RVSR incorrectly assigned January 30, 2008, as the effective date for payment for a veteran's prostate cancer claim; however, the VARO did not receive the veteran's claim until February 15, 2008, the correct effective date for payment for this disability. As a result, VA overpaid the veteran a total of \$2,669 over a period of 1 month.
- An RVSR incorrectly assigned July 23, 2008, as the effective date for payment for a veteran's non-Hodgkin's lymphoma claim with special monthly compensation; however, the VARO did not receive the veteran's claim until August 8, 2008, the correct effective date for payment for this disability. As a result, VA overpaid the veteran a total of \$302 over a period of 1 month.

Because we found only 2 inaccuracies out of a total of 107 claims, we determined the VARO is generally following VBA policy. As such, we made no recommendation for improvement in this area.

Dates of Claim

VARO staff established the correct dates of claim in the electronic records for all 30 claims folders we reviewed. As a result, we determined the VARO is following VBA policy regarding date of claim and we made no recommendations for improvement in this area.

Notices of Disagreement

The VARO's Appeals Team did not record 1 (3 percent) of 30 NODs in the electronic system within VBA's 7-day standard. An NOD is a written

communication from a claimant expressing dissatisfaction or disagreement with a benefits decision and a desire to contest the decision. Further, an NOD is the first step in the appeals process. The Appeals Team is responsible for timely entering NODs in VACOLS, an application that allows VARO staff to control and track a veteran's appeal and manage the pending appeals workload. VBA policy states VARO staff must create a VACOLS record within 7 days of receiving an NOD.

Because we did not consider the frequency of errors significant, we determined the VARO generally followed VBA policy. We made no recommendations for improvement in this area.

3. Management Controls

Systematic Analysis of Operations

Jackson VARO management followed VBA policies by timely and accurately completing all 12 required SAOs. An SAO is a formal analysis of an organizational element or VSC operational function. SAOs provide an organized means of reviewing VSC operations to identify existing or potential problems and propose corrective actions. As part of their analysis of operations, VSC staff identified potential problems and made recommendations to improve those areas prior to our inspection. Therefore, we made no recommendations for improvement.

Systematic Technical Accuracy Reviews

VARO staff adhered to policies by taking corrective actions to address all 22 errors identified by VBA's STAR program. In addition, VARO management appropriately used information regarding these errors to develop a plan to train staff.

The STAR Program is VBA's multi-faceted quality assurance program to ensure that veterans and other beneficiaries receive accurate and consistent compensation and pension benefits. VBA policy requires that the VARO take corrective action on errors identified by STAR.

Because we did not find any errors associated with the 22 claims folders we reviewed, we determined the VARO is following VBA policy. As such, we made no recommendations for improvement in this area.

4. Workload Management

Mail Handling Procedures

VARO mailroom staff did not always process mail the same day they received it in the mailroom. VBA's administrative procedures for mail management states staff will open, date stamp, and route all mail to the appropriate location within 4–6 hours of receipt at the VARO. Further, staff will apply a date stamp to each piece of incoming mail reflecting the date the mail actually arrived at the VARO.

VBA policy states effective mail management is crucial to workflow success and control within the VSC. In addition, VBA policy indicates oversight is the most important element to ensure staff efficiently utilizes the workload management plan. The Jackson VARO assigns responsibility for mailroom activities, including processing incoming mail, to the Support Services Division (SSD).

Finding Controls Over Processing Mail in the VARO Mailroom Need Strengthening

VARO mailroom staff did not always process all incoming mail daily, including date stamping all mail the same day it arrived in the mailroom.

This occurred because SSD and VARO mailroom supervisors were unaware of VA's mail management policy regarding the requirement to process, date stamp, and route all mail to the appropriate location within 4–6 hours of receipt at the VARO. Therefore, these supervisors provided ineffective oversight of mailroom operations. As a result, VSC staff may have underpaid beneficiaries.

We observed mail received in the mailroom on June 8, 2010, but not processed until the next business day. The mailroom supervisor informed us the current procedures do not require staff to process all incoming mail on the day it arrives at the VARO. Mailroom staff can finish processing any remaining mail during the next business day, including applying the date stamp to incoming mail. Although we did not observe this process, the mailroom supervisor informed us staff date stamped mail on the last business day of the month. The VARO did not have a standard policy in place for this practice.

Because incoming mail did not receive the proper date stamp, the VARO may not have paid benefits on the correct dates. Generally, a benefit payment date is the first of the month following the date stamped on the incoming claim. For example, if mailroom staff properly date stamp claim-related mail received on January 31, the benefits would be payable on February 1. However, if mailroom the staff inaccurately date stamps this same claim-related mail on February 1, then the payment date would be March 1 and VSC staff would unintentionally underpay the beneficiary by 1 month.

Neither VARO employees nor we could identify any veterans' claims affected by improper date stamping of mail. However, analysis of their Pending Claims Report revealed VSC staff processed a combined total of 61 claims on May 1, 2010, and June 1, 2010 prior to our inspection. Because VARO mailroom staff does not process all mail on the day it arrives, some of these 61 claims could potentially have the incorrect date

stamp. Ultimately, VBA could potentially underpay beneficiaries by 1 month by not recording the actual receipt date on claims documents.

The SSD supervisor informed us that because of his lack of knowledge regarding specific requirements in the VA Mail Management policy, he did not provide adequate oversight of mailroom operations. The SSD supervisor indicated his only method of evaluating performance was by observing mailroom operations.

We provided the SSD and VARO mailroom supervisors a copy of VBA's administrative procedures for mail management during our inspection. Both supervisors stated they were not aware of the requirement that mail should be opened, date stamped, and routed to the appropriate location within 4–6 hours of receipt at the VARO until we provided it to them.

- Recommendation**
3. *We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director develop and implement a plan to ensure Support Services Division staff process and date stamp all incoming mail the same day it arrives in the VA Regional Office mailroom.*
 4. *We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director develop and implement objective performance measures to ensure oversight of mailroom operations.*

**Management
Comments**

The VARO Director concurred with our recommendations for improving the mail processing procedures in the VARO mailroom. Further, the Director agrees that it is imperative to ensure that all mail is date stamped each day. Therefore, to strengthen oversight of mailroom operations, the Director assigned responsibility of mailroom operations to the VSC Triage Team Coach.

In addition, management is developing a modified Mail Management Plan that includes objective measures and oversight of work accomplished. By October 1, 2010, the Director expects VSC management to complete the mailroom transition and implement the modified Mail Management Plan.

OIG Response Management's comments and actions are responsive to the recommendation.

5. Eligibility Determinations

VA must consider beneficiary competency in every case involving a mental health condition that is totally disabling or when evidence raises questions as to a beneficiary's mental capacity to manage his or her affairs. As part of the Public Contact Team, the Fiduciary Unit supports implementation of incompetency determinations by appointing fiduciaries, third parties that assist in managing funds, for incompetent beneficiaries. We reviewed competency determinations completed by the VSC Decision Team to ensure

staff completed them accurately and timely. Delays in making these determinations ultimately affect the Fiduciary Unit's ability to appoint fiduciaries timely.

Finding Controls over Incompetency Determinations Need Strengthening

Incompetency Determinations

VARO staff unnecessarily delayed making final decisions in 15 (71 percent) of the 21 incompetency determinations they completed during January–March 2010. The delays ranged from approximately 19 to 279 days. Of the 15 delays we identified, staff processed 11 in excess of 30 days, with an average completion rate of 108 days. The delays occurred because the VSC workload management plan did not contain procedures emphasizing immediate completion of incompetency determinations. The risk of incompetent beneficiaries receiving benefit payments without fiduciaries assigned to manage those funds increases if staff does not complete the competency determinations immediately.

VBA policy requires staff to obtain clear and convincing medical evidence a beneficiary is incapable of managing his or her affairs prior to making a final incompetency decision. The policy allows the beneficiary a 65-day due process period to submit the evidence showing an ability to manage funds and other personal affairs. At the end of the due process period, VARO staff must take immediate action to determine if the beneficiary is incompetent.

In the absence of a definition of “immediate,” we allowed 14 calendar days after a due process period to determine if staff was timely in completing the competency decision. We considered this a reasonable period to control, prioritize, and finalize these types of cases.

Using our interpretation of immediate, the most significant case we identified occurred when VARO staff unnecessarily delayed making a final incompetency decision for a veteran for approximately 9 months. During this period, the veteran received disability payments of \$30,132. While the veteran was entitled to these payments, fiduciary stewardship was not in place to ensure effective management of funds and welfare of the veteran.

Despite VBA policy requiring “immediate” completion of incompetency determinations, VSC management did not place priority on working such cases and chose to complete older claims instead. A Senior Veterans Service Representative responsible for this type of work confirmed that staff never placed priority on working incompetency determinations. This Senior Veterans Service Representative stated, “My definition of immediate is day 66, the day after the 65-day due process period expires.”

VSC management did not agree with our 14-day definition of “immediate” in the absence of an official VBA standard. The Veterans Service Center Manager indicated 30 days would be a reasonable period to complete an incompetency determination. Although management disagreed with our definition, it does not appear its interpretation has ensured efficient internal controls to achieve the program’s timeliness objectives as intended by current policy. As a result, we are issuing a Management Advisory to VBA’s Under Secretary for Benefits informing VBA leadership of our concerns regarding the untimely processing of incompetency determinations.

Recommendation 5. *We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director amend the workload management plan to establish a timeliness standard ensuring immediate completion of final competency determination.*

Management Comments The VARO Director concurred with our recommendation. The Director informed us the VSC amended its workload management plan to require staff to expedite final competency determinations within 14 days after the due process period. Further, VSC staff will generate and review a VETSNET Claim Label listing on a daily basis and disseminate the listing to all Coaches to ensure staff promptly process these determinations.

OIG Response Management’s comments and actions are responsive to the recommendation.

Appendix A VARO Profile and Scope of Inspection

Organization	The Jackson VARO is responsible for delivering non-medical VA benefits and services to veterans and their families in Mississippi. The VARO fulfills these responsibilities by administering compensation benefits, radiation compensation claims, vocational rehabilitation and employment assistance, and outreach activities.
Resources	As of March 2010, the Jackson VARO had a staffing level of 218 full-time employees. Of these, 194 (89 percent) were assigned to the VSC.
Workload	As of April 2010, the VARO reported 6,909 pending compensation claims. The average time to complete these claims during FY 2010 was 222.2 days—66.2 days longer than the national target of 156 days. As reported by STAR, accuracy for compensation rating-related issues was 83.9 percent or 6.1 percent below the VBA target of 90 percent. Accuracy for compensation authorization-related issues was 91.5 percent or 4.5 percent below the VBA target of 96 percent.
Scope	<p>We reviewed selected management controls, benefits claims processing, and administrative activities to evaluate compliance with VBA policies regarding benefits delivery and non-medical services provided to veterans and other beneficiaries. We interviewed managers and employees and reviewed veterans' claims folders.</p> <p>Our review was comprised of 77 (27 percent) of 289 claims related to PTSD, TBI, and herbicide exposure-related disabilities that the VARO completed during January–March 2010. For temporary 100 percent disability evaluations, we selected 197 existing claims from VBA's Corporate Database. Because VARO staff processed too few temporary 100 percent evaluations during January–March 2010 for us to review and draw conclusions, we examined all related claims processed. The 197 claims selected represent all instances in which VARO staff granted a temporary 100 percent disability determination for at least 18 months. From these 197, we selected a random sample of 30 claims for our review. We provided the VARO with the remaining 167 claims to assist in implementing our first report recommendation.</p> <p>We reviewed all 21 incompetency determinations and 22 errors identified by VBA's STAR Program during the period of January–March 2010. VBA measures the accuracy of compensation and pension claims processing through its STAR Program. STAR's measurements include a review of work associated with claims that require a rating decision. STAR staff review original, reopened, claims for increased evaluation, and appellate issues that involve a myriad of veterans' disabilities claims.</p>

Our process differs from STAR as we review specific types of claims issues such as PTSD, TBI, and herbicide exposure-related disabilities that require rating decisions.. In addition, we review rating decisions and awards processing involving temporary 100 percent disability determinations.

We selected for review dates of claim and NODs pending at the VARO during the time of our inspection. We completed our review in accordance with the President's Council for Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspections*.

Appendix B VARO Director's Comments

**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

MEMORANDUM

Date: August 27, 2010

From: Director, VA Regional Office Jackson

Subject: Inspection of the VARO Jackson, MS

To: Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations (52)

1. Attached are the Jackson VARO's comments on the OIG Draft Report: Inspection of VARO Jackson.
2. Questions may be referred to Mr. Craig Moore, Director, at 601.364.7010, or Mrs. Gail Berry, Veterans Service Center Manager, at 601.364.7044.

(original signed by:)

CRAIG MOORE
Director

Attachment

**Jackson VSC Response
OIG Recommendations from June 2010 Site Visit
August 27, 2010**

IG Recommendations

IG Recommendation 1:

We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director conduct a review of all temporary 100 percent determinations under the regional office's jurisdiction to determine if reevaluations are required and take appropriate action.

RO Comments: Concur

The Jackson Regional Office (RO) has completed a review of the listing of one hundred sixty-seven (167) cases provided by OIG. Action has been taken on one hundred twenty-six (126) of the files reviewed. The majority of these cases required a new VA examination and all required rating determinations. Forty-one (41) of the files required no additional action. All cases requiring a new VA examination and rating determination have been completed or have an End Product (EP) 310 pending.

The Veterans Benefits Administration recommends closure of this recommendation.

IG Recommendation 2:

We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director develop and implement controls to ensure staff follows the workload management plan and properly request future examinations for temporary 100 percent disability evaluations.

RO Comments: Concur

In June 2010, the RO provided refresher training to VSRs to ensure that they are processing work items and future exam diaries in accordance with all applicable VA regulations. The Jackson RO amended the Veterans Service Center (VSC) workload management plan in June of 2010 to ensure that the VSC Program Analyst generates and reviews the work items cancellation report, the work items completed report and the work items pending report on a monthly basis. The purpose of this review is to ensure that all 800 series work items are correctly reviewed and any necessary series 310 control EPs are established for additional processing.

The listings are reviewed and disseminated to the VSC Management staff. Any outliers and trends of non-compliance are noted and brought to the attention of the appropriate VSC Coach for investigations and necessary actions. The investigating Coach is required to report back to VSC Management regarding their findings. These additional procedures were implemented to ensure that all 800 series work items/EP 310s are processed according to VA regulations and guidelines.

The Veterans Benefits Administration recommends closure of this recommendation.

IG Recommendation 3:

We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director develop and implement a plan to ensure Support Services Division staff process and date stamp all incoming mail the same day it arrives in the VA Regional Office mailroom.

RO Comments: Concur

The Report includes the statement made by the mailroom supervisor that they did not always stamp in all the mail every day. The inspector was informed by the mailroom supervisor that she was a former VSR and as such understood the importance of ensuring all mail was stamped in on the final business day of the month to preserve the claimant's date of claim to that month.

The Report stated that neither the IG nor VARO employees could identify any instance of a veteran's claim being affected by improper date stamping of the mail. The report notes that 61 claims were established with a date of claim of either May 1, 2010 or June 1, 2010. The pending claims report shows 136 claims established on April 30, 2010, and May 28, 2010, the last business days of April and May. Approximately 2,238 claims were established in April and May during 42 business days for an average of 53 claims established per day. The average for any two-day period would be 106 claims.

The Regional Office agrees that it is imperative to ensure that all mail is date stamped each day and measures are now in place to ensure proper procedures are followed. In order to strengthen our ability to accomplish this, the Mailroom will be placed under the direct supervision of the VSC Triage Coach to ensure effective oversight is given to this vital operation. We have begun the transition process and expect it to be completed by October 1, 2010.

During this transition, the Triage Team Coach is responsible to ensure that all mail is stamped into the VARO on the date it is received into the mailroom. Verification will be accomplished by the Triage Team Coach during the workweek. This validation process will also ensure that the stamp affixed to the correspondence is clear, legible and bears the current date. Random checks will also be performed on outgoing mail to ensure that it is being sent on a timely basis. In addition to the augmented level of oversight this change will provide, additional resources will be available to ensure that all incoming mail is processed and date stamped the date it arrives at the VARO mailroom. The Triage Team Coach will ensure that sufficient resources are available to accomplish these measures. The Jackson VSC mail workflow plan will be amended to account for the oversight of this segment of VSC operations.

IG Recommendation 4:

We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director develop and implement objective performance measures to ensure oversight of mailroom operations.

RO Comments: Concur

In conjunction with the assumption of Mailroom oversight by the VSC, a modified Mail Management Plan (MMP) is being developed that includes objective measures and oversight of work accomplished.

The MMP will require that all mail be stamped into the VARO on the date it is received into the mailroom. Verification will be accomplished via random spot checks by the Triage Team Coach during the workweek. This validation process will also ensure that the stamp affixed to the correspondence is clear, legible and bears the current date. The MMP will contain the frequency and sample size that is required for these checks. Random checks will also be performed on outgoing mail to ensure that it is being sent on a timely basis. The local MMP will adhere to the requirements laid out in M23-1, Part I, Chapter 1, Mail Management, which includes requirements for date stamping mail, processing incoming official mail, misdirected mail, veterans service organization mail, and internal controls.

The MMP will be completed and in place before the Triage Team assumes full control of the mailroom on October 1, 2010.

IG Recommendation 5:

We recommend the Jackson VA Regional Office Director amend the workload management plan to establish a timeliness standard ensuring immediate completion of final competency determination.

RO Comments: Concur

The Jackson VSC has amended its workload management plan to ensure all actions are expedited on claims pending a final incompetency determination. The workload management plan now requires these cases to be expedited within fourteen (14) days after they reach sixty-five (65) days pending.

The VSC generates and reviews a VETSNET Claim Label listing on a daily basis and disseminates the listing to all Coaches to ensure that these cases are processed promptly.

The Veterans Benefits Administration recommends closure of this recommendation.

Appendix C Inspection Summary

10 Operational Activities Inspected	Criteria	Reasonable Assurance of Compliance	
		Yes	No
Claims Processing			
1. 100 Percent Disability Evaluations	Determine if VARO staff properly reviewed temporary 100 percent disability evaluations. (38 CFR 3.103(b)) (38 CFR 3.105(e)) (38 CFR 3.327) (M21-1MR Part IV, Subpart ii, Chapter 2, Section J) (M21-1MR Part III, Subpart iv, Chapter 3, Section C.17.e)		X
2. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	Determine whether VARO staff properly processed claims for PTSD. (38 CFR 3.304(f))	X	
3. Traumatic Brain Injury	Determine whether service connection for all residual disabilities related to an in-service TBI were properly processed. (Fast Letters 08-34 and 08-36, Training Letter 09-01)	X	
4. Disabilities Related to Herbicide Exposure	Determine whether VARO staff properly processed claims for service connection for disabilities related to herbicide exposure (Agent Orange). (38 CFR 3.309) (Fast letter 02-33) (M21-1MR Part IV, Subpart ii, Chapter 2, Section C.10)	X	
Data Integrity			
5. Date of Claim	Determine if VARO staff properly recorded the correct date of claim in the electronic records. (M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, Chapter 1, Section C)	X	
6. Notices of Disagreement	Determine if VARO staff properly entered NODs into VACOLS. (M21-1MR Part I, Chapter 5)	X	
Management Controls			
7. Systematic Analysis of Operations	Determine if VARO staff properly performed a formal analysis of their operations through completion of SAOs. (M21-4, Chapter 5)	X	
8. Systematic Technical Accuracy Review	Determine if VARO staff properly corrected STAR errors in accordance with VBA policy. (M21-4, Chapter 3, Subchapter II, 3.03)	X	
Workload Management			
9. Mail Handling Procedures	Determine if VARO staff properly followed VBA mail handling procedures. (M23-1) (M21-4, Chapter 4) (M21-1MR Part III, Subpart ii, Chapters 1 and 4)		X
Eligibility Determinations			
10. Incompetency Determinations	Determine if VAROs properly assessed beneficiaries’ mental capacity to handle VA benefit payments. (M21-1MR Part III, Subpart v, Chapter 9, Section A) (M21-1MR Part III, Subpart v, Chapter 9, Section B) (Fast Letter 09-08)		X

Appendix D OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

OIG Contact	Brent Arronte (727) 395-2425
Acknowledgments	Kristine Abramo Brett Byrd Robert Campbell Madeline Cantu Lee Giesbrecht Kerri Leggiero-Yglesias Mark Ward

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